

Blindness

If you suspect your bunny is blind — or is going blind — the first step is to consult a veterinarian to see if there is an underlying disease that needs to be treated. For example, cataracts are usually just a sign of aging. They can also result from trauma, an underlying genetic predisposition, or *E. cuniculi*. Depending on what your veterinarian suspects, she may suggest blood work to rule out *E. cuniculi* and other conditions, head x-rays to check for tumors and abscesses, or other diagnostic tests. If you have access to a veterinary ophthalmologist, your veterinarian may suggest a consultation to rule out glaucoma and to discuss treatment options.

If your rabbit is blind because of cataracts, you may wonder about surgery. This is a personal decision that should be made by you, your veterinarian(s), and your rabbit. When Choca Paws developed cataracts at age six, we discussed this option with a veterinary ophthalmologist. We were told that the procedure was very expensive and that there was no guarantee that it would be successful. More importantly, the surgeon had no prior experience with rabbits and we would have to take Choca Paws (who hated car rides) two hours each way for the procedure. I asked the ophthalmologist if he recommended the procedure. His answer was that he always felt that cataract surgery in animals was more for the owner than for the animal. This frank response helped me feel comfortable with our decision not to subject Choca Paws to surgery.

If you determine that your bunny is permanently blind, the first thing to remember is that rabbits are not nearly as dependent on their eyesight as we humans are. A blind bunny can live quite happily with only a few minor adjustments.

A blind bunny's main living area — including placement of his litter-box, food, and water — should stay as consistent as possible. A roomy bathroom, partitioned off by a baby gate, is ideal because the fixtures tend to stay put. It is also a room that humans visit frequently, so the bunny will have plenty of human interaction.

A blind bunny will still want to explore beyond the limits of his area. Make sure you are there to help if he gets into trouble. When Choca Paws came out to explore the rest of the house he ran rather awkwardly, keeping his nose to the ground most of the time. Sometimes he got overly confident about remembering where things were and ran (sometimes hard) into a piece of furniture or wall (usually something that was **always** there, not something that was moved recently). It never really slowed him down. I think it hurt my husband and me more to see him run into something than it hurt him.

If your bunny doesn't have a mate and has been neutered (or you are comfortable having him neutered), consider getting him a **gentle** mate of the opposite sex. Having a companion of his own species can be a great comfort for a disabled bunny, and you can learn a lot about compassion by watching a bunny look after his mate. If you decide to consider a mate, arrange with the nearest rescue group or shelter to bring your blind bunny along and let him help pick out his companion. This will improve the chances of a low-stress bonding experience. Carefully observe your bunny's interactions with his potential mate and listen to your instincts — they will help you know whether your blind bunny will be happier alone or with a rabbit companion.

Remember, sight is only one of the five senses. Stimulate the others, especially hearing and touch. Always speak (softly) as you approach a blind bunny, so as not to startle him. Spend as much time as you can with him — sit next to him, pet him, and speak soothingly to him. Since he can't see you, touch lets him know you are near and that you love him. If you are lucky, like we were with Choca Paws, he will reward you with "bunny kisses." Try not to pick a blind bunny up any more than necessary unless you

are certain he enjoys it. Being lifted off the ground is threatening to many bunnies and can be even more frightening to one who cannot see.

You will continue to learn how your bunny adapts to his handicap — and you will be amazed at how intelligent he is. About a week after Smokey died of cancer, Choca Paws ventured into the kitchen (Smokey's "private space") for the first time ever. I heard this incessant tippity-tap, tippity-tap, tippity-tap — the kitchen is decent sized, but not huge. Finally, I got up to see what he was doing. He was going back and forth along one wall — over and over. I said, "What **are** you doing?" Then I realized ... he was "learning" the dimensions of this new room. At that moment, I was overwhelmed with the depth of this brave creature's intelligence and ability to adapt.



Choca Paws as a young bunny. (Photo by Kathy Smith)



Choca Paws after he lost his sight (Photo by Kathy Smith)